

Opinion

South Asia, Pakistan: Poverty and the terrorist

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Poverty is constantly on the rise in all South Asian countries. So is the rise of religious fundamentalism; and there is a close link between the two. Australia recently hosted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi as part of the G20 summit. The reported 'pop star' reception he received from the Australian-Indian community illustrates the current popularity of conservative politics and religious fundamentalism in South Asia.

The enthusiasm for Modi, however, overlooks his responsibility for the mass murder of 1000 Muslims in Ahmadabad during 2002.

It also ignores how the communal violence orchestrated by his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in last May's general elections in India helped ensure his landslide win. Pakistan is no stranger to fundamentalist violence. The murder of a Christian couple on November 10 near Lahore is the latest manifestation of this growing fanaticism. The couple were falsely accused of burning the Quran, the Holy Book of Islam. Incited by a local cleric, over 1000 Muslim villagers mobbed the brick kiln where the couple worked and threw them into the oven.

The right-wing fundamentalist trend has mainly arisen because progressive and democratic parties in government, working within a neo-liberal framework, have failed to resolve the basic issues confronting the overwhelming majority of people in the country. If civilian governments are weak then people are likely to see fundamentalism as viable.

Religious fundamentalists in Pakistan manipulate religious belief, especially as there is no state control over their activities. Banned terrorist networks can change their names slightly and continue to operate publicly.

The fundamentalists use religion to stir up hatred and silence dissent. They assassinate radical journalists and human rights activists and are starting to target other supporters of religious tolerance. These are difficult and dangerous times for the left, for social democrats, radical liberals, trade unions and peasants, women, minority rights and youth organisations in Pakistan.

The spread of neo-fascist ideas is leading to those belonging to Christian and Hindu communities (who make up three percent of Pakistan's 200 million population) as well as members of minority communities such as Hazaras, Shias and Ahmadis to leave Pakistan. Women and other marginalised sections of society are also on the radar of fanatical groups.

Malala Yousafzai, an internationally recognised activist and Nobel prize winner from Swat was, for example, attacked because of her courageous writings and efforts to promote girls' education.

Most of the terrorist activities carried out in Pakistan are linked to madressahs. Some of the madressahs model themselves on the Taliban and have become sources of wealth for leaders of Islamic parties and extremist groups. The 20,000 or more madressahs in Pakistan have become

popular sources of education because of the poor state of public schools. (The government spends only two percent of its budget on education). It has been suggested in vain that the major madressahs could be placed them under state control and their funds audited.

If the federal budget were increased to 10 percent of the GDP and fees were abolished, then all citizens would have the opportunity to attend school, college or university.

Pakistan must deal with terrorist activities according to the law and state institutions must break all links with fundamentalist groups. Fanatics must not be allowed to exercise control over any area.

Tackling poverty is the ultimate answer to neutralising the appeal of extremist groups and fundamentalists. Increasing the basic wage, introducing an unemployment allowance and implementing massive land reforms which distribute land to the landless would undermine the economic and ideological power of extremism.

There are no easy solutions to defeating terrorism and its barbaric neo-fascism but rule of law, education and an end to poverty would be a good start.

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